

Leavenworth Papers

No. 2



*Nomonhan:
Japanese-Soviet Tactical Combat,
1939*

by Edward J. Drea

Combat Studies Institute

U.S. Army Command and General Staff College
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027

JANUARY 1981

FOREWORD

Military history is the peacetime laboratory for the professional soldier. As duPicq reminds us, "only study of the past can give us a sense of reality and show us how the soldier will fight in the future." Serious study of our profession helps narrow the gap between training and battle. Publication and dissemination of tactical battle studies is the central focus of the Combat Studies Institute and the *Leavenworth Paper* series.

At first glance, the study of the Imperial Japanese Army fighting the Soviet Red Army would appear to have little pertinence to the current doctrinal concerns of the U.S. Army. The great advances in weapons technology seem to relegate the Nomonhan fighting to antiquarian status as remote as the Outer-Mongolian border where the battle occurred. However, Dr. Edward J. Drea's, *Nomonhan: Japanese-Soviet Tactical Combat, 1939*, which is the second publication in the *Leavenworth Paper* series, goes beyond the mere narration of a remote combat engagement.

At its most basic level, this study provides an insight into how two foreign armies conducted field operations in the days just before World War II. Of particular interest is the manner in which Japanese stereotypes of Soviet tactics and doctrine adversely influenced the Japanese operations. At an intermediate level, this essay describes the Imperial Japanese Army's formulation of operational doctrine and the application of that doctrine against the Red Army. It clearly reveals that doctrine must be dynamic in both formulation and application; the theoretical must be relevant to the reality of the battlefield. Finally, the paper makes us aware of the human factor in combat. Outnumbered, outgunned, and outmaneuvered, the Japanese officers and men of the 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, held their positions until they received orders to withdraw. Tradition, unit esprit, training, and doctrine all contributed to this exceptional display of courage in the face of awesome enemy superiority.

Today the U.S. Army stresses the concept of fighting outnumbered and winning. To achieve that difficult feat of arms will require thorough preparation and intensive, realistic training before the first battle of the next war. This account of how the Imperial Japanese Army prepared for its "first battle" should help us profit from the Japanese experience against a formidable Soviet enemy. While it points out errors, it also identifies several Japanese strengths which almost prevailed against the greatest concentration of armor and mechanized forces then known.


WILLIAM R. RICHARDSON
Lieutenant General, USA
Commanding

Director

Colonel William A. Stofft

John F. Morrison Professor of Military History

Dr. D. Clayton James

Combined Arms Center Historian

Dr. Roger J. Spiller

Chief, Research Committee

Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth A. Steadman

Research Fellows

Lieutenant Colonel Richard G. Brown

Major Charles E. Heller

Dr. Allen F. Chew

Dr. Edward J. Drea

Chief, Teaching Committee

Lieutenant Colonel David M. Glantz

Teaching Fellows

Major Robert K. Griffith, Jr.

Major Thomas W. Sweeney

Captain Patricia B. Genung

Dr. Robert H. Berlin

Dr. Michael J. King

CSM Kenneth Chavis, Jr.

Bibliographer

Elizabeth R. Snoke

Editor

Alice M. McCart

Staff

Major Scott L. Hays

SFC Nelson C. Rogers

SP4 Daisy M. Wilson

Mrs. Terri L. Castillo



The *Leavenworth Papers* are issued by the Combat Studies Institute, an element of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of Defense or any element thereof. Requests for additional copies or for permission to reprint *Leavenworth Papers* in whole or part should be addressed to the Director, Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027.

Leavenworth Papers US ISSN 0195-3451

Leavenworth Papers

No. 2



*Nomonhan:
Japanese-Soviet Tactical Combat,
1939*

by Edward J. Drea

Combat Studies Institute
U.S. Army Command and General Staff College
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027

JANUARY 1981

Contents



Maps.....	v
Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	ix
1. THE NOMONHAN CAMPAIGN (MAY—SEPTEMBER 1939): A SUMMARY	
<i>Japanese Initiatives</i>	1
<i>The Soviet Offensive</i>	9
2. MEN, DOCTRINE, WEAPONS	
<i>Manchuria in the Middle</i>	12
<i>Preliminary Skirmishes</i>	14
<i>Weapons and Doctrine</i>	16
<i>Terrain</i>	21
<i>First Japanese Defeat</i>	28
<i>Mobilization of the 2/28th Infantry</i>	29
<i>Japanese Stereotypes of the Soviets</i>	30
3. THE IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY'S JULY OFFENSIVES	
<i>Overview</i>	32
<i>Meeting Engagement</i>	34
<i>Night Attack I and Soviet Retaliation</i>	45
<i>Redeployment</i>	47
4. STALEMATE AND ATTRITION	
<i>Hills 742 and 754</i>	53
<i>Soviet Tactics</i>	59
<i>Position Defense</i>	61
<i>Night Attack II</i>	66
5. SOVIET STYLE BLITZKRIEG	
<i>Japanese Intelligence Failures</i>	71
<i>Soviet Fixing Attacks</i>	72
<i>Encirclement of the 2/28th Infantry</i>	77

6. CONCLUSION	
<i>Outcome</i>	86
<i>Doctrine</i>	86
<i>The Cost of Courage</i>	89
<i>Doctrinal Implications for the IJA</i>	90
Appendixes	91
Notes	101
Bibliography	109

Maps



1. Opposing orders of battle.....	2
2. Disputed border area between Nomonhan and Khalkhin Gol in 1939	3
3. Destruction of Lieutenant Colonel Azuma's reconnaissance unit 28 May 1939	5
4. Japanese general offensive 1—4 July 1939	6
5. Japanese general offensive 23—25 July 1939	8
6. Soviet plan of operations 20 August 1939.....	10
7. Terrain features and roads near Nomonhan in 1939	22
8. The 250-kilometer radius of operations from major Japanese and Soviet bases	25
9. Transportation facilities	26
10. Japanese offensive 3—5 July 1939	38
11. 7th Company, 2/28th Infantry's destruction of attempted Soviet infiltration 7 July 1939	44
12. 2/28th Infantry's situation 10 July 1939	49
13. 2/28th Infantry redeployment south of the Holsten River 28 July 1939	55
14. General situation south of the Holsten River early August 1939	58
15. Annihilation of Soviet infiltration attempt 8 August 1939	63
16. 6th Company, 2/28th Infantry, night attack on Soviet positions 18—19 August 1939	68
17. Soviet offensive south of the Holsten River 20—31 August 1939	74
18. Soviet gains to 26 August 1939	81
19. Breakout of 2/28th and situation as of 28 August 1939.....	85

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Many persons have contributed their time helping in the preparation of this monograph. Special thanks must be given to the Military History Department staff of the Japan National Defense College whose kind assistance made it possible to assemble most of the documents used in this study. In particular, LTG (RET) Toga Hiroshi, director of the Military History Department, allowed me access to the IJA archive holdings at the College. Messrs. Kondo Shinji and Arima Seiichi provided valuable advice, suggestions, and graciously agreed to read the manuscript. LTC Inoue Motomu acted as my escort at the College and continues to be a source of information of Japanese military history. Without such able professionals, this paper could not have been written.

INTRODUCTION



"A Strange War," observed a 20 July 1939 New York *Times* editorial about the fighting between the Soviet Red Army and the Imperial Japanese Army on the Mongolian steppes. The *Times* derided both combatants' claims as exaggerated but inadvertently touched on the distinctive feature of the fighting when it described the battle as "raging in a thoroughly out-of-the-way corner of the world where it cannot attract a great deal of attention."¹ Geography, the combatants' compulsive secrecy, and the subsequent outbreak of World War II in September 1939 all combined to overshadow the most massive use of tanks theretofore recorded. The Soviets used over 1,000 tanks during the fighting and, under the command of General Georgi K. Zhukov, evidenced skill and sophistication at mechanized warfare. The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA), essentially an infantry force, fared poorly, and fell victim to a Soviet double envelopment.

While this "Strange War" may be all but forgotten in the West, the Soviets continue to regard it as a brilliant example of the proper manner in which to fight a limited border war. During the time of border clashes with the Peoples' Republic of China in 1968 and 1969, it was no coincidence that several articles about the 1939 border war ap-

peared in Soviet military journals. At least a dozen such articles have appeared in Soviet military literature in the 1970s. Soviet experience gained in 1939 apparently still carries great weight today.

Similarly, IJA staff officers subsequently examined the Japanese Army's performance at Nomonhan in minute detail, and even today the battle serves as a case study at the advanced tactical schools of the Japanese Ground Self Defense Forces. The interest of an ally and of a potential adversary suggests that it would be beneficial for the U.S. Army to know what happened at Nomonhan/Khalkhin Gol in the summer of 1939.

Yet little on the subject has appeared in English.² Furthermore, Japanese studies and the few accurate English language accounts tend to focus on affairs at the division level or above. The purpose of this paper is to examine the battalion and company level tactics that Japanese infantrymen used to fight the Soviets and the degree of success those tactics achieved.

All modern armies have a tactical doctrine, the officially approved method for their various units to fight on the battlefield. The IJA invested much

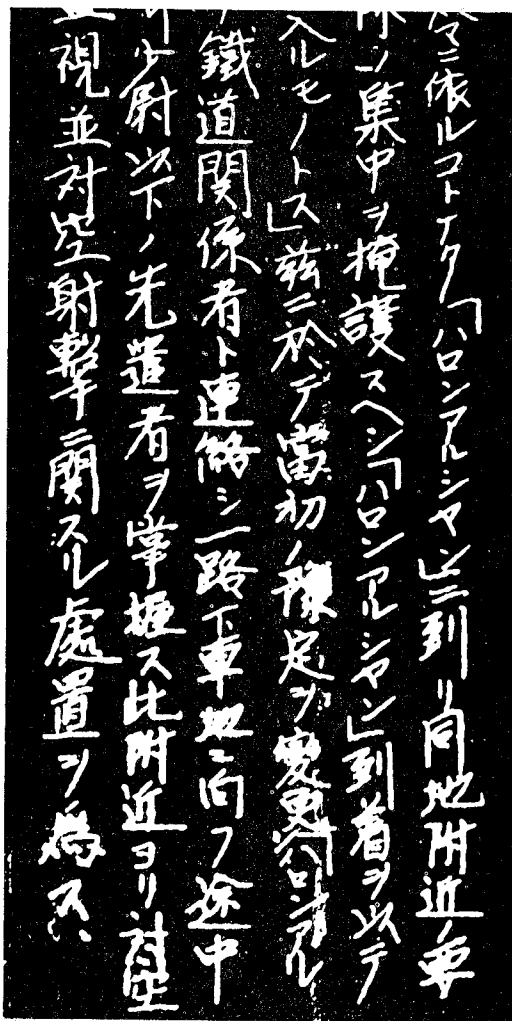
time, talent, and treasure to formulate a tactical doctrine that would be successful against their potential enemy, the Soviets, who were superior to the IJA in manpower and materiel. This essay briefly describes the evolution of that IJA tactical doctrine, and then presents a detailed examination of how a particular Japanese infantry battalion applied that tactical doctrine in combat against the Soviets in 1939.

Looking at a small unit in combat allows the historian the chance to analyze and to scrutinize doctrine in the test of battle. Such an approach, in turn, surfaces questions about the flexibility, applicability, and effectiveness of doctrine which should concern all armies.

The day-by-day account of a single Japanese battalion in battle is not, however, a comprehensive treatment of the entire Nomonhan fighting. Ordinary Japanese combat infantrymen, like those of any army, did not have the time to reflect on whether or not their fighting techniques followed official IJA doctrine. The Japanese private, clinging to a sand dune during an enemy artillery barrage, could not have a clear grasp of the overall battle, the so-called "Big Picture," which retrospect provides. He received orders and carried out those orders based on his previous training. His was a limited but unique view of land warfare. Here an overview of the Nomonhan campaign is provided, but the theme is small unit tactics and the focus is the battalion, the microcosm, not the division or the army.

The IJA's 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division (2/28th Infantry), serves as the vehicle for this study. There are several rea-

sons for the selection of this particular unit. First, the 2/28th Infantry's report of the fighting (hereafter referred to as War Diary) is available and provides detailed information on its day-to-day



Excerpt from 2/28th Infantry War Diary.

operations against the Red Army at Nomonhan. Second, the battalion operated as an independent unit attached to different task force commanders for different missions. Third, it is neither so small that its activities were overshadowed by a parent unit nor too large for the study of small unit tactics. Finally, the battalion participated in

both offensive and defensive operations against the Red Army, providing an insight into IJA tactics for each situation.

The primary documents used in this study are in the IJA archives, which are open to the general public. One collection is available on microfilm in the U.S. Library of Congress. The original documents are kept at the National De-

fense College Archives in Tokyo, Japan. These IJA documents were originally classified materials, and I have included the original military classification when citing the documents to allow the reader to have a sense of the importance that the IJA attached to these papers. Throughout this study all Japanese personal names are given in the Japanese manner, surname preceding given name.

Edward J. Drea
Combat Studies Institute
U.S. Army Command and General
Staff College
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas